

CONCLUSION

WHAT HAS NOT CHANGED?

At its most fundamental level, the role of the permanent secretary has not changed. The permanent secretary remains the key link between the democratic process (the political level) and the public service. The three primary functions involved – policy adviser to the minister, head of a government department, and member of the overall corporate team for the public service – remain the core responsibilities of the permanent secretary. In particular, the obligation to offer advice to the minister in a professional and non-partisan manner remains as important as ever.

Happily, permanent secretaries say that they still like their jobs and find the work challenging and satisfying. They enjoy the opportunity to make a difference. Most permanent secretaries said they did not feel they could find a job in the private sector that would give them the same sense of making a contribution to the country.

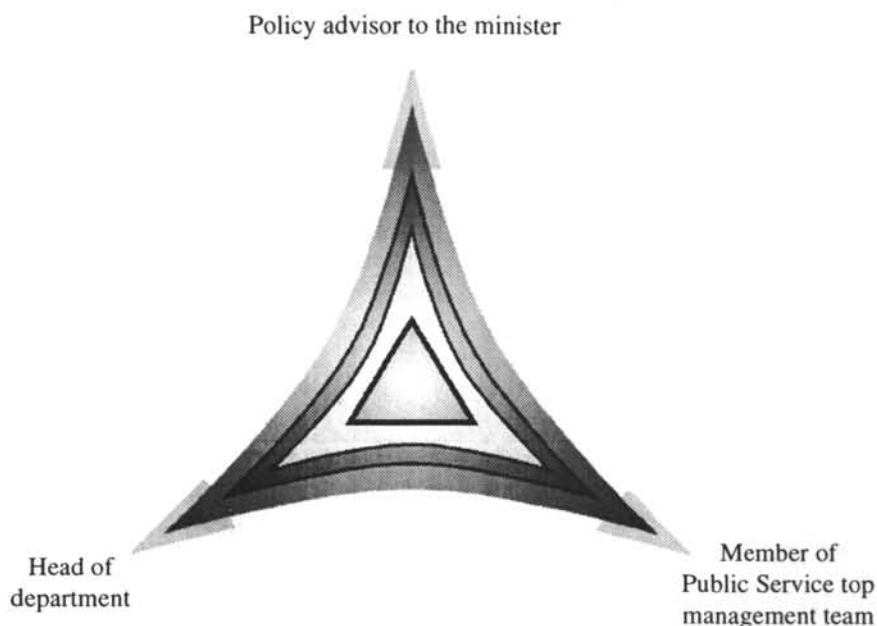
WHAT HAS CHANGED?

While basic roles have not changed, the last ten years have seen an explosive growth in the demands of the job. The role of *policy adviser* has become complicated by the overriding needs of economic development, by the increasing inter-relationship of issues, and by the growing mesh of international treaties and obligations that diminish national sovereignty. The role of *head of department* grows more complicated as resources diminish, while the need to demonstrate leadership and show results increases. The role of *member of public service top management team* is made more demanding as issues increasingly appear not within departmental silos but as matters that cross governmental boundaries. Permanent secretaries need to work horizontally with other departments and department heads to a much greater extent than in the past. Normal communication channels can often impede projects that involve other ministries. Experience has shown that co-ordination at the level of the permanent secretaries concerned helps resolve bottlenecks and speed implementation.

As citizens demand greater public consultation and participation in policy development, permanent secretaries find themselves leading more stakeholder consultations. They must, therefore, begin to take on the role of broker, or problem-solver.

The permanent secretary is being stretched in all directions at the same time. More complicated policy questions, more complex management issues, more demands for involvement in the management of government as a whole (Figure 5). This situation is potentially dangerous, especially as the resources available are being severely limited.

Figure 5. Permanent secretary “stretched”



It is important that all Commonwealth countries closely examine the obligations they are imposing on their permanent secretaries and take appropriate steps to ensure that these obligations can be handled appropriately. Box 6 provides an example of how one Canadian government department has responded to the growing complexity of the work of the permanent secretary.

Box 6

The “Office of the Permanent Secretary”

One of Canada’s largest government departments has responded to the growing complexities of the role of the permanent secretary by creating the “Office of the Permanent Secretary”.

The “Office of the Permanent Secretary” includes the permanent secretary (head civil servant who is ultimately accountable to the Minister), associate permanent secretary, and senior assistant permanent secretary for service delivery. Under the leadership of the permanent secretary, his team guides strategic change within the organisation, determines corporate priorities and accountabilities, heads key decision-making committees, and provides policy advice to the minister.

The “Office of the Permanent Secretary” spearheads responses to emerging policy issues and bring forward the department’s best policy, programme and service delivery advice. They also provide leadership throughout the department, articulating their vision for the future, the values, principles, and ethics of the department.

Together, these three individuals work closely as a team and share responsibility for the roles of a permanent secretary – policy adviser, organisational leader, and corporate manager.

The roles are often divided along the following lines:

- the permanent secretary and his associate permanent secretary share responsibility for the role of policy adviser and work closely together on policy issues;
- organisational leadership, on the other hand, is provided by all three individuals, however, a large part of the administrative role (departmental manager) is carried out by the senior assistant permanent secretary; and
- the corporate role is largely carried out by the permanent secretary. The permanent secretary sits on a number of committees and attends weekly governmental briefing meetings for permanent secretaries on behalf of the department.